UNITED
NATIONS

CEDAW

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.
GENERAL

CEDAW/C/SR.292
25 January 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Fifteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 292nd MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Friday, 19 January 1996, at 10.15 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. CORTI

CONTENTS

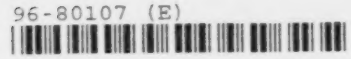
CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Chief, Official Records Editing Section, Office of Conference and Support Services, room DC2-794, 2 United Nations Plaza.

Any corrections to the records of the meetings of this session will be consolidated in a single corrigendum, to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

96-80107 (E)



/...

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Ethiopia (CEDAW/C/ETH/1-3 and Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Haile-Michael (Ethiopia) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Ms. HAILE-MICHAEL (Ethiopia), introducing the combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Ethiopia (CEDAW/C/ETH/1-3 and Add.1), said that although her country had signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1981, the prevailing political situation had not been conducive to its implementation. At the time of accession, the Government had been engaged in a prolonged war that consumed some 60 per cent of the national budget. It was only when a new transitional Government had come to power in 1991 following the end of the civil war that a number of socio-political and economic reforms had been undertaken. A democratic, decentralized political system had been established, a new Constitution had been adopted in 1994 and a federal Government had been formed in 1995. The current democratic system of governance at the national, regional and local levels was facilitating the emergence of an economic and social environment which had a positive impact on the welfare of Ethiopian women.

3. The typical Ethiopian woman was impoverished, had no access to land, technology, credit or health care and, in addition to repeated child-bearing, had to perform arduous household and agricultural tasks. In response to that situation, a series of social policy measures had been taken over the past four years, including the establishment of a national women's policy which was expected to go a long way towards creating conditions for the liberation of women from economic, social and political backwardness, improving their living conditions and enhancing their participation in the development process. All other major social policies, including health policy and the new education policy, had given priority to gender issues and were helping to create an environment conducive to the overall improvement of women's living conditions.

4. The Government was committed to the advancement of women because that was central to the advancement of Ethiopian society as a whole. In that regard, a Women's Affairs Office had been established within the office of the Prime Minister to serve as focal point for the formulation, coordination and implementation at the national, regional and sectoral levels of the Government's national policy on Ethiopian women, the objectives of which included creating conditions that would enable women to participate on equal terms with men in the economic, political and social life of the country by eliminating prejudices and customary and other practices based on the idea of male supremacy; facilitating women's equal access to basic social services, and reducing women's workload through the provision of technology; and enhancing the status of rural and nomadic women by addressing their educational and development needs.

5. Several advances had been made in addressing gender disparities. The new Constitution, especially its article 35 on women's issues, reflected a strong commitment to the principles of the Convention, which had, moreover, been translated into Amharic and distributed widely. Eighteen members of the 548-member constituent assembly had been women, and 13 of the 548 seats in the new Parliament were held by women. A committee on equality for the advancement of women had been established in Parliament to monitor the promulgation of laws that promote women's rights.

6. The devolution process had led to the election of an impressive number of women deputies at the local level, where the active and full participation of all members of the community in the identification of needs and the formulation and implementation of programmes and projects to meet those needs was encouraged. In the urban dwellers' associations, where most community matters were decided, two thirds of elected officers were women, having been found to be less corrupt than men and more likely to attend to their constituents' needs. Women parliamentarians were in the process of establishing a parliamentary union that would serve as a potential ombudsman for women, as well as a channel for gathering information that would help in setting priorities and drafting bills to be forwarded to Parliament by the committee on equality.

7. Ethiopia had accepted the Beijing Platform for Action without reservation and was focusing on human development and poverty reduction. Its rural-centred development programme envisaged the expansion of education, health care and drinking water supply in rural areas, and the reduction of unemployment and the expansion of basic social and economic infrastructures in urban areas. Women's affairs focal points at the national, regional, local and community levels would help to ensure the implementation of comprehensive development programmes that incorporated gender concerns. Regional and local women's affairs offices, departments and units would compile gender-specific statistics in order to monitor the impact of development programmes on girls and women.

8. Efforts were being made to institutionalize a multisectoral approach, starting from the community and going up to the central level and involving the public, private and donor sectors, as well as women themselves. Women's voluntary associations were instrumental in promoting the active participation of women in order to enable them to benefit from development efforts. However, despite the existence of political will, Government commitment, official policy and proper institutional arrangements, achieving the goals of the national programme of action would require a massive outlay of financial resources. The Government was placing its hopes in the donor community and trusted that the Committee would assist her country's efforts by providing material, moral and technical support.

9. The CHAIRPERSON noted that, despite a host of problems such as wars, natural disasters and ethnic frictions, Ethiopia's Government had ratified the Convention and other human rights instruments immediately. She commended the Government for having accepted the Beijing Platform for Action without reservation. The Committee would make a special effort to identify areas where international assistance was required, since Ethiopia's economic difficulties clearly could not be overcome without such assistance. The figures on women's political participation, especially at the local level, demonstrated that

democracy was gradually taking root and flourishing in Ethiopia. In her view, the most difficult task facing the Women's Affairs Office was the realization of de facto equality. However, with the commitment of women like the Minister for Women's Affairs, she was confident that Ethiopia would succeed in improving the situation of women. In that regard, the Government should, to the extent possible, implement a policy of compulsory education.

10. Ms. ABAKA agreed that it was encouraging that the Government of Ethiopia had approved the Beijing Platform for Action without reservation and had made concrete commitments to implement it. It was to be hoped that, with the involvement of women inside and outside the Government and with the help of the international community, Ethiopia would be able to fulfil those commitments.

11. While it was laudable that Ethiopia had translated the Convention into one local language, Amharic, she asked how widely that language was spoken, since Ethiopia had at least 60 other languages.

12. The reports were not structured according to the Committee's guidelines; Ethiopia might do well to seek technical assistance in preparing its next report.

13. Since Ethiopia was linguistically and ethnically diverse, decentralization was a key to enabling people at the local level to participate in governing the nation. However, it appeared that conflicts had begun to break out between ethnic groups; she asked whether any policies or measures were in place to avoid a situation such as that which had developed in Rwanda and Burundi. Many opposition parties were reported to have taken up arms, with the result that the danger of internal conflict was very great. She asked what was being done to achieve reconciliation between the Government and opposition political parties.

14. Ms. BERNARD commended the frankness and honesty of the report; while the original report (CEDAW/C/ETH/1-3) did not conform to the Committee's guidelines, some attempt had been made to abide by those guidelines in the addendum. That approach should be borne in mind for the next report.

15. It seemed that the main problems inhibiting development in Ethiopia were poverty, deep-rooted traditional practices and customs, and the ravages of 30 years of civil war. The new Government faced a daunting task in its efforts to eradicate poverty; in order to eliminate traditional practices tied to the subservient role of women, aggressive educational programmes would be needed to change people's attitudes. She hoped that the Government would embark on such programmes as soon as possible in order to accelerate the advancement of women. Education should also include re-educating men, so as to overcome traditional ideas about the inferiority of women.

16. She commended the Government of Ethiopia for showing the political will to improve the status of women by ratifying the Convention and filing reports; financing from international funding agencies would clearly be needed as well.

17. Ms. AOUIJ said that the picture painted in Ethiopia's reports was very sombre; Ethiopia was home to one of the oldest civilizations in the world, but was now suffering from all the misfortunes experienced by the African continent,

aggravated by the political situation. To its credit, the Government of Ethiopia was trying to emerge from that situation. Development, in all its dimensions, was the primary task. Poverty must be eradicated so that everyone could share equally in the benefits of economic growth. To that end, there must be a true partnership between men and women; it must be ensured that women had access to basic services such as education, health and family planning, especially in rural areas. With policies for the education of women and firm control of population growth, Ethiopia would have a chance to succeed.

18. The State on its own could not solve all the problems; women's organizations, non-governmental organizations and national and international institutions must all coordinate their efforts to strengthen Ethiopia's economy and hence the situation of women. The Women's Affairs Office must work for the integration of women in development and the eradication of all discriminatory measures and laws which kept women in a situation of extreme inferiority. The existing laws were a negation of women's human rights. Women must redouble their efforts to promote development and improve their de facto situation.

19. Ms. KHAN said that the problems of Ethiopian women were basically the same as those of women in most of the least developed countries; women were always the first victims of drought, famine and civil war.

20. Although the Government of Ethiopia had signed the Convention in 1981, it had taken a long time to submit a report and had not followed the Committee's guidelines. However, it was encouraging to note the frank statement in paragraph 33 of the report that a major problem was that women were not taken seriously and their concerns did not have visibility, with the result that inappropriate policies, programmes and projects were developed. That problem was extremely common. With greater political participation by women in Ethiopia, particularly at the local government level, it was to be hoped that the situation would improve. More women were needed at the policy-making level, to ensure that women's concerns were taken into account.

21. The reports contained very little data on the situation of women; she hoped that Ethiopia would try to generate more data.

22. She agreed that political will alone was not enough and that resources were also needed; that point had been stressed by other countries in international forums and at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

23. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that, given all the other problems facing the Government of Ethiopia, she was impressed that it had been able to produce the reports. She hoped that the next report would conform to the Committee's guidelines, since that was helpful in developing a constructive dialogue. The Government of Ethiopia might consider seeking technical assistance from the United Nations for the preparation of its next report.

24. She was overwhelmed at the difficulties faced by Ethiopian women, and by the Ethiopian Government in trying to improve the situation. The multiplicity of ethnic groups added to the problem; she hoped that mechanisms would be found for keeping the peace and mainstreaming policies at the national level for the benefit of the various ethnic groups.

25. She commended the Ethiopian Government's recognition that the situation of women was a decisive factor in national, regional and community development, and its decision to establish a women's affairs office and focal points for women in strategic government agencies. She agreed that emphasis must be placed on combating poverty. The frankness of the report was the first step towards assessing the situation of women realistically and developing appropriate policies and strategies. She endorsed the need for moral, economic, financial and technical support from Governments and international agencies. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, her Government had committed a large sum of money to helping developing countries, and she would try to find out whether assistance would be given to Ethiopia.

26. It might be helpful to the Ethiopian Government if the Committee were to ask for an interim report, on an exceptional basis, so as to evaluate what had been done and give Ethiopia visibility within the United Nations system.

27. Ms. BARE commended the Government's openness in discussing the situation of women in Ethiopia. She was impressed by the section concerned with violence against women, since all too often domestic violence went unrecorded and unrecognized. The Ethiopian Government had made the bold statement that the most daunting task was that of challenging local customs and traditional practices that encouraged violence against women, and changing a public attitude that tolerated violence; that statement suggested that strategies were being formulated by the Women's Affairs Office.

28. The report should provide an indication as to what proportion of the national budget went to poverty elimination and education. Resources might need to be set aside for monitoring the progress made.

29. The representative of Ethiopia had indicated that more women were being elected to public office. Since women's ability to influence decisions started at the local level, it was important for women to be empowered at that level.

30. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that the report demonstrated the political will of the Ethiopian Government to improve the status of women. The development of vertical programmes without the involvement of those concerned was a common problem; the Ethiopian Government and the Women's Affairs Office must promote solidarity among women and genuine political mobilization, so as to ensure that women's priorities were taken fully into account. The programmes that were developed could be fully successful only if they involved women as actors and beneficiaries. Political mobilization would give women and women's associations and movements an opportunity to take charge of their own destiny.

31. Ms. KHAN asked whether the Convention to which Ethiopia had acceded without reservations, could be invoked in courts of law.

32. Ms. GARÇIA-PRINCE congratulated the representative of Ethiopia for the honesty and frankness of the report, which made it clear that Ethiopian society was highly structured and extremely authoritarian in terms of the gender roles of men and women. Changing the situation would be a long-term process and would require the creation of a new culture; a strategic approach to the problem was needed. Although new laws did not of themselves change reality, they provided a

very important benchmark for the Government and the nation. She wondered whether there was any legislative programme in the Ethiopian Parliament for modifying the highly discriminatory nature of most of the country's legislation, and what concrete measures were being or would be implemented. It would be totally incongruous for the Government to have ratified the Convention and accepted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, while failing to take action to remedy the de facto situation described in the report, especially the extremely grave violations of women's human rights which were taking place, including the practice of female circumcision. The Government should provide additional information on what it planned to do about that problem, which lay at the very heart of women's human rights.

33. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING noted that, given the coexistence of three bodies of law - international, national and customary - in Ethiopia, it must be very difficult for the Government to plan centralized policies for overcoming certain traditional and customary practices. She wondered whether any attempt was being made, at the level of the central Government, to compile comprehensive information on the three types of laws; certain international foundations or funds could be of assistance in conducting the necessary research for that purpose.

34. Ms. OUEDRAOGO noted that the report described a number of different national mechanisms for improving the situation of women. Such an approach was entirely appropriate, given the multisectoral nature of the problem. She wondered, however, whether the necessary coordination was taking place to avoid duplication and overlapping.

35. Ms. ABAKA said that the adoption of affirmative action at the level of university admissions was a positive step, but wondered whether it would not be preferable to extend such a measure to all levels of education. If girls had difficulty in gaining access to primary and secondary education, many of them would never even reach university level. Given the extremely widespread incidence of prostitution, she wondered whether any training schemes existed to enable women to gain access to alternative sources of income. Many women were forced into prostitution because they had no other means of survival; measures to improve the situation in that respect would also help to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

36. Ms. KHAN asked what had been the practical impact of the national policy on Ethiopian women and what mechanisms existed for coordination among the women's units and departments created in a number of Government ministries.

37. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL asked whether the Government and non-governmental organizations were making practical use of the Convention, the Committee's general recommendations (particularly General Recommendation No. 19) and the reports of the Special Rapporteur on the elimination of violence against women; whether the Government was cooperating with the Special Rapporteur and providing her with the necessary information on the situation in Ethiopia, including the persistence of traditional practices harmful to the health of women; and whether the Special Rapporteur had been invited to visit Ethiopia. She noted that the Special Rapporteur's report had shown that rape, particularly of young girls, and domestic violence were still widespread in Ethiopia, as in a

number of other countries. She wondered whether any federal plan had been put in place to tackle the problem of that type of violence. Such a plan would, of course, have to be closely coordinated with programmes for education, information and women's health. She also wished to know whether the Government's efforts to tackle the problem of violence against women included educating such groups as doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, judges and the leaders of ethnic groups and, if so, whether any progress had been achieved.

38. She would welcome additional information on the problem of traffic in women and exploitation of the prostitution of others. On a more optimistic note, she hoped that if the country's economic growth continued and women participated increasingly in the decision-making process, the Government's next report would contain more encouraging news.

39. Ms. GARCIA-PRINCE said that it was very important that the Government should provide additional information on its initiatives to modify patterns of socio-cultural behaviour. The Government's report, as well as those of non-governmental organizations, made it clear that women were treated as objects in Ethiopia and that their wishes and rights were not taken into account. Many were forced to engage in prostitution as the only alternative to starvation for themselves and their families. The Government should explain what steps were being taken, or what plans existed, to tackle a socio-cultural situation which relegated women to the pitiful status apparent in the report. The scale of the problem was so enormous that it was hard to imagine how it could be tackled, but education was certainly an essential condition for the necessary fundamental changes.

40. Ms. ESTRADA CASTILLO said that, in a country where discrimination and gender stereotypes were so deeply rooted in the popular mentality, constant, massive education campaigns were needed to achieve the necessary changes.

41. She noted that there were some women in Ethiopia who occupied important positions. Although that fact might seem to contradict the statement in the report that women were not taken seriously, the reality was that only a few women, who belonged to a privileged minority in the capital city, had access to such positions.

42. Since Ethiopia had ratified the Convention and other human rights instruments, it was imperative that the Government should take decisive action to put a stop to the mutilation which was still being inflicted on 90 per cent of the country's women. It was a universal principle of law that there were crimes of omission as well as crimes of commission, and anyone who failed to denounce a crime or take effective measures to prevent it was an accessory to it. She asked what was being done by educated, privileged women to put pressure on the Government to take urgent measures to eradicate the crime of genital mutilation of girls. Had those women formed any organizations for that purpose and did those organizations have any power? Had the Government taken any measures, issued any declarations or organized any campaigns to curb that crime? Was it in fact clearly and specifically defined as a criminal offence in Ethiopia and, if so, was anyone ever prosecuted and punished for it?

43. The CHAIRPERSON said that the practice of genital mutilation of girls was such a deeply rooted tradition in a number of African countries that a legal approach to the problem would not suffice. In communities where the practice existed, mothers considered it normal and desirable that their daughters should be subjected to it. It was therefore essential to teach women that it was not only unnecessary, but cruel and unacceptable; the education of women by women must be a major part of the solution, and she wondered what initiatives were being taken to begin that process.

44. Ms. AYKOR said that traffic in women and girls and prostitution were the main areas in which violence against women must be countered. With reference to the statement in the report that many schoolgirls were sexually harassed by schoolteachers, she noted that most prostitutes in Ethiopia were schoolgirls attempting to earn money for immediate necessities. She asked whether the Women's Affairs Office had instituted any policies for changing that state of affairs and the underlying attitudes towards girls. In particular, she wished to know how prostitution was organized, whether it was legal and, if so, whether there were attendant health and rehabilitation policies. One factor related to the prevalence of prostitution seemed to be the low age of marriage, which should be raised.

45. Ms. BARE asked what steps were being taken to rehabilitate prostitutes by providing them with training for alternative livelihoods and helping them to avoid disease. Women's cooperatives could perhaps play a role in that regard.

46. Ms. BERNARD asked what percentage of legal practitioners were women and how many female judges there were.

47. Ms. GURDULICH DE CORREA said that much needed to be done in Ethiopia. The main priority for the Government was to eliminate poverty and to improve the political representation of women. The low level of education was also a major problem. She asked what prospects there were for the enactment of legislation requiring a minimum level of representation for women at all decision-making levels. Women must participate in order for women's problems to be solved.

48. Ms. GARCIA-PRINCE said that education was of primordial importance. The high level of illiteracy among Ethiopian women was unacceptable, while efforts to combat it seemed to have been sporadic. The school drop-out rate among girls was also high, and she asked what measures were being taken to reduce it. There was also a need for training for work, as part of a concerted education policy.

49. Ms. HARTONO said that the situation in Ethiopia was such that it was unrealistic to expect rapid change. In her own country, the Government had sought to advance the status of women by incorporating women's issues into national policies. Social change could be brought about only through education by mobilizing women as agents of change. With reference to the incidence of sexual harassment in schools, a compulsory programme of education in gender equality was needed to address the issue: relationships between men and women must be changed. Education must also embrace family planning and nutrition. Peace and stability were prerequisites for all such action.

50. Ms. MUÑOZ-GOMEZ said that the situation in Ethiopia was distressing. Education was important for addressing the high level of illiteracy, improving the school drop-out rate, and changing stereotypes. In her country, the Government had instituted a programme whereby children could absent themselves, briefly, from school in order to attend to family duties, such as harvesting, and then return and continue their studies. The United Nations Children's Fund might be able to provide assistance to Ethiopia in that regard.

51. Ms. CARTWRIGHT said that the Ethiopian Government must make a special effort to promote education for girls and to encourage women's participation in society. Only by improving women's ability to support themselves and participate, in particular through the promotion of literacy and legal literacy, would it be possible to solve the formidable problems facing women in Ethiopia.

52. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that much remained to be done to make education freely available in Ethiopia. In fact, the western model of education was not suited to Africa, where many countries were now attempting educational reforms. Education represented the way forward, notwithstanding the lack of resources. In her country, with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund, efforts had been made to tackle illiteracy through informal education systems stressing information, education and communication. Emphasis had been placed on programmes with cultural, nutritional and training components, so as to address lack of awareness in such basic areas as hygiene and to enable girls to lead an active life in society. Such policies would help to make women economically independent in a context of social mobilization.

53. With regard to female circumcision, it should be noted that many of the people involved thought that the practice helped, rather than harmed, girls. In the face of such attitudes, a dialogue must be attempted and an effort made to understand prevailing views in order to change them. A coherent approach, with support from international agencies, must also provide for penalties.

54. It was important to look at the real situation, particularly that of rural girls, who had to work. Even such modest endeavours as providing training for maids could help to stop the exploitation of rural girls. The key lay in education and training at an informal level.

55. Ms. KHAN said that education was the most important issue and that affirmative action programmes were needed to encourage the enrolment and retention of girls in schools. In her country, such policies had been tried quite successfully; food had been distributed to parents to encourage school attendance by girls and Government resources had been provided to schools where the percentage of girls in attendance equalled that of boys. Villages where illiteracy had been eradicated were eligible for additional Government funding.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.